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Vzhledem k tomu, že se jednalo o dvouletý projekt, navazuje tento popis na text průběžné zprávy, která byla odevzdána v minulém roce, a soustředí se na aktivity realizované v roce 2017.

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LEARNING MORE FOREIGN LANGUAGES (in: The European Proceedings of Social & Behavioural Sciences EpSBS)

IMPACTS OF PREVIOUS STUDIES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES ON STUDYING ENGLISH LATER IN LIFE (in: 4th International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Sciences and Arts SGEM 2017, Conference Proceedings, Book 3, Science and Society, Psychology and Psychiatry, Language and Linguistics)

LEARNING MORE FOREIGN LANGUAGES – LEARNERS’ POINT OF VIEW (in: ICERI2017 Proceedings)

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## Seznam literatury

### Seznam literatury podle šablony ID záznamu

[1]Tauchmanová, V. Learning More Foreign Languages. *The European Proceedings of Social & Behavioural Sciences EpSBS*. FUTURE ACAD, PO BOX 24333, LONDON : Future Academy org. UK, 2017. 9s. ISSN: 2357-1330. Kód RIV: AM - Pedagogika a školství.  
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[2]Tauchmanová, V. IMPACTS OF PREVIOUS STUDIES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES ON STUDYING ENGLISH LATER IN LIFE. *4th International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Sciences and Arts SGEM 2017, Conference Proceedings, Book 3, Science and Society, Psychology and Psychiatry, Language and Linguistics*. Sofia : SGEM 2017, STEF 92 Technology Ltd., 2017. 8s. ISBN: 978-619-7408-19-5. ISSN: 2367-5659. Kód RIV: AM - Pedagogika a školství.  
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# LEARNING MORE FOREIGN LANGUAGES – LEARNERS´ POINT OF VIEW

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## Abstract

Knowledge of foreign languages is very important, and its importance has been growing in recent years. During their course of life, a majority of human beings get into contact with more languages, inputs of other languages appear quite soon in the present multi-cultural environment and come from media, films and contacts established with foreigners on the private or business bases. The present educational policy of the European Union requires the knowledge of at least one foreign language. In a big number of European countries, learning of at least two foreign languages is obligatory for secondary school and university students. The process of learning more foreign languages is quite demanding - the knowledge of the mother tongue and at least one foreign language acquired before has definitely an impact on learning and understanding of other languages. Students´ previous experience with and skills gained from learning languages must not be ignored. Not only teachers should be aware of the existence of the issues of language interference and positive transfers. The main objective of the text is to present findings resulting from the research currently carried out at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic). Various groups of university students are expressing their opinions on the issue of learning more foreign languages. The aim is to find out whether students are aware of factors influencing their learning process. The findings will be used for making proposals of potentially improved ways of teaching foreign languages.

Keywords: Foreign language learning, language awareness, language interference, positive transfer.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the present multi-cultural environment, a majority of human beings acquire not only their mother tongue, but receive quite a lot of inputs from other languages coming from media, films, contacts established with foreigners, etc. The acquisition of some foreign language expressions and phrases is quite often unintentional and unplanned. This kind of "natural" acquisition of foreign languages is, however, not systematic and cannot result in successful and effective communication in other languages.

The necessity of being able to communicate in at least two languages used in the European continent is reflected in the present educational policy of the European Union - learning at least one foreign language is obligatory at European schools. In accordance with the documentation worked out by the Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic, primary school pupils have to start with learning the first foreign language in their third grade at latest, the starting point of learning the second foreign language comes then in the seventh grade of primary schools.

The process of learning more foreign languages is definitely demanding and more or less never-ending. The aim of educationalists and foreign language teachers should be to provide their foreign language learners with supportive instructions and guidelines which will make the learning process easier. It is clear that certain learning skills and abilities which have been already acquired can be transferred. If foreign language learners know how they can profit from their own learning experience, and how they can eliminate the negatively influencing factors, their learning process will get more effective and their motivation for further studies will increase. The proper guidelines can be provided by teachers and/or tutors and mentors with a quite high level of language awareness – if foreign language teachers are aware of ways in which their learners´ knowledge of other languages and their experience in learning languages can be positively used, a more effective teaching process and, followingly, a more effective learning process can be logically expected.

It is the responsibility of educational institutions to apply such ways of educating and training teachers of foreign languages which will result in a high level of the graduates´ language awareness. The efforts to generally improve the teaching process at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic) are linked with a number of research projects. One of these projects focuses on the issue which is linked with the awareness mentioned above.

The total length of the realization of the project is two years (2016 – 17); its core focus is on the impact of the already acquired knowledge of English (which is nowadays the first foreign language taught and learnt in the Czech Republic) on the process of studying other languages. There are two main aims of the research. One of them is to reveal possible ways of diminishing the language interference and eliminating common mistakes resulting from it. The other aim is to find and to present potential ways of using positive transfers brought by previous studies of foreign languages.

Four students who are enrolled in the master's degree studies specializing in teaching foreign languages are involved in the above mentioned research project. Three of them major in teaching English and German at upper primary schools, one majors in teaching English, Czech and French at secondary schools. The position of these students is rather specific - they are studying foreign languages (so it is quite common that they can make mistakes resulting from language interference), and, simultaneously, they are being trained how to teach the languages studied (so they need to become aware of the issue of language interference and also of the issue of positive transfers existing when more foreign languages are studied). Being made involved in the research process, the students will hopefully faster and better develop their teaching skills, and they will become *"autonomous and creative professionals, with responsibility for their wider development of professional theory and practice"* [1].

The text focuses on university students' opinions on their learning more foreign languages. These opinions are researched into by the above mentioned specific group of students – i.e. the four pre-service teachers of two foreign languages who are being trained for their professional career and who should be aware of the fact that *"Learning more about language and about how language works is a useful, productive and interesting activity: increasing one's awareness – being more 'alive' to language - can bring considerable benefit, both personal and professional."* [2]. The term language awareness, which is used in the text, *"is an approach to language study which draws upon a number of disciplines including language teaching, applied linguistics, and several other related areas such as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and anthropological linguistics. It encompasses work undertaken in a variety of contexts: first language learning in schools and higher education; teaching and learning second or foreign languages; and the study of socio-cultural influences upon people's use of language."* [2]. It can be claimed that language teachers should be constantly increasing their language awareness of the languages taught by them and the languages studied by their learners because then they can make more competent judgements and decisions in their teaching process.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

One inspirational source of our research project were findings made by Swan & Smith, who focus on learners of English, and claim that *"the mother tongue can affect learners' English in several ways"* [3]. They made a survey of typical errors made by learners of English who have the same mother tongue and who (during their learning process) develop a typical interlanguage – a variety of English which is produced by non-native learners and which bears signs of the learners' mother tongue. Swan and Smith's publication can help teachers of English anticipate certain characteristic and specific problems which will have to be sorted out during English courses given to learners sharing the same mother tongue (different from English).

Three of the students involved in the research are majoring in German, that is why they referred to the typical interlanguage produced by German speaking people studying English and to typical mistakes made by these speakers, as they are presented by Swan & Smith. The reason for looking into this interlanguage were the efforts to confirm the existence of certain additional impact (i. e. the impact of the previously learnt English on German learnt as the second foreign language after English) which was expected to appear in performances in German language made by Czech native speakers whose first foreign language is English. Certain kind of a "double interlanguage" can be expected when the second foreign language is being learnt – *"the language which is influenced by two language impacts - both the mother tongue's impact and the impact of the first foreign language studied"* [4].

The first methodological approach taken was that of quantitative research – a sample of 48 written tests in German was analyzed. The tests were completed by applicants wanting to study German language at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove. 27 respondents (that means 56.25% out of the total number of the tested applicants) made at least one of the mistakes which are listed by Swan & Smith [3] as mistakes typically made by German native speakers learning English. The most frequently appearing mistake was misspelling of the German word 'Sohn' ('Son', 'son'), furthermore, English expressions or expressions resulting from knowledge of English appeared in the

submitted tests ('wenn' / 'when' instead of 'wann'; 'where' instead of 'wo'; 'uncle' instead of 'Onkel'; 'schauen' instead of 'ziegen', 'behind' instead of 'hinter', etc.).

A kind of qualitative research was applied in the next phase of our research. The students made their self-reflections on their learning of more foreign languages, and on the basis of these self-reflections they proposed a questionnaire to be distributed to university students who have experienced learning of more foreign languages.

A combination of both qualitative and quantitative research approaches is applied when evaluating the answers appearing in the questionnaire. The research has not been completed so far. Proposals resulting from the research and leading to potentially improved ways of learning and teaching of foreign languages will be made in the final phase of the research.

### 3 RESULTS

The above mentioned research project has not been completed yet. This chapter will focus merely on the first phase of the project. The most important issues of this first phase was making the four students aware of the necessary research activities, training the students in making self-reflections and making the students aware of language interference and positive transfer. The importance of a further development of this awareness and its creative application on both the learning and the teaching processes was stressed in the first phase of the project. The students' language awareness and creative application are reflected in their proposals of the form of the questionnaire and in their proposals for teaching practice.

#### 3.1 Pre-service teachers of two foreign languages

The first sub-chapter will focus on the research activities carried out and on opinions expressed by the four students who are involved in the above mentioned research team.

##### 3.1.1 *Personal "biography" of and self-reflections on learning more foreign languages*

The first task to be completed by the researching students was to present their personal "biography" of learning foreign languages (the number and order of the languages studied) and their self-reflections on these studies (positive and negative impacts of the previous learning experience on further studying of foreign languages).

Student A (majoring in teaching English and German) started with learning English in the first grade of her primary school (at the age of six), in the sixth grade (at the age of eleven) she started with learning German.

English was the first foreign language for Student B (majoring in teaching English and German). This student started with learning English at lower primary school at the age of nine, at the age of fourteen she started learning German. At the age of eighteen she was learning Spanish (just for one year), she has studied Russian for two terms and French for one term.

Student C (also majoring in teaching English and German) is the only one whose first foreign language was not English. His first foreign language was German (started at the age of nine). His second foreign language was Russian (started at the age of twelve). He did not start with learning English at school until his secondary school attendance (but he had acquired quite a lot of English from films and computer games before starting his secondary school studies).

Student D (majoring in teaching English, French and Czech) started with learning English at the age of six (the first grade of her primary school). At the age of ten she took courses in Russian, at the age of eleven she started with French, one year later she got the basics of Spanish and at the age of sixteen the basics of German.

The second task for the students was to reflect on their own studies of their second foreign language from the point of the language interference. The students were to give examples of such errors in their performances in their second foreign language which were caused by the impact of their first foreign language.

Student A made quite a detailed survey of the negative impact of English on her performances in German: ignoring Gender distinction in the category of German determination, mistakes in plural of German nouns (applying a much easier English formation), spelling mistakes in expressions which are

similar in German and English, mistakes in the German word order (in phrases with modal verbs and in dependent clauses).

Student B feels the strongest negative impact of English on her German in the sphere of vocabulary (using English expressions instead of German ones and/or creating expressions in which English and German are blended together).

Student C surprisingly mentioned the negative impact of English on his German although his first foreign language was German. The negative language interference appears mainly in the incorrect word order in German sentences created by him.

Student D sees the strongest language interference in the sphere of vocabulary and pronunciation of the words which are similar in English and French.

The third task for the students was to make their self-reflections on their own studies of more foreign languages from the point of a potentially positive transfer. The students were asked to think about situations and moments in which their previously acquired experience, knowledge and skills have been helpful in their further process of learning other foreign languages.

Student A feels the highest potential of positive transfer in the sphere of vocabulary – it is quite easy for her to guess the meaning of the words which are similar in English and German, and it is easy to learn these expressions in both the languages.

Student B uses the positive transfer especially in the sphere of grammar – there are similarities in e.g. formation of passive voice and some tenses in English and German; gradation of English and German adjectives is similar, too.

Student C successfully transfers his previous knowledge of word formation (Lehrer vs. teacher) and basic structures of German and English sentences.

Student D considers the knowledge of the formation and use of English tenses as being successfully transferrable into the process of learning verb tenses in French.

### 3.1.2 *Proposals made for teaching practice*

The four students have already started their teaching practice. Our aim is to make them realise that reflections on their own process of learning foreign languages can help them develop useful teaching strategies. That is why our students were asked to refer to their own self-reflections and to come up with proposals how to properly guide their own learners, how to make these learners aware of using their experience and knowledge and / or how to eliminate the logically existing language interference. The students developed and applied their self-reflections in the following ways:

Student A's first proposal was to "preventively" draw her learners' attention to so called "false friends" (e.g. 'Fabrik' and 'bekommen' in German versus 'fabric' and 'become' in English) through giving some absurd examples of incorrect use of these expressions immediately at the moment when the learners firstly get in contact with these expressions. The second proposal is linked with teaching vocabulary – it seems convenient to present the meaning of some similar German / English words through giving their translation into English / German. Both the languages are practised this way, and the awareness of similarities makes the learning process more effective. The usefulness of this proposal is confirmed also by Swan [5]: "*Language distance clearly has some effect on the amount of transfer that can take place between languages, and therefore on the extent to which transfer can support or hinder learning. Related languages often share a great deal of cognate vocabulary, and even where vocabulary is not cognate, there tend to be close translation equivalents: this can give learners an enormous advantage.*" Student A further recommends referring to formally similar verb forms in English and German. This formal similarity, however, does not guarantee the semantic equivalence. If formally similar verb forms have a different grammar meaning, the teacher has to warn the learners about language interference.

Student B similarly proposed referring to English word forms when presenting and explaining similar word forms existing in German (similar modal verbs, similar formation of passive voice and future tense, similar principles of secondary modality).

Student C found (maybe rather surprisingly) similarities between English phrasal verbs and German verbs which include prefixes. That is why he proposes referring to English phrasal verbs to help his learners better understand the principles of using German verbs with incorporated prefixes.



It was not surprising that student D proposed referring to English when explaining the system of French verb tenses. The systems of English and French verb tenses and verb forms are very similar, and a big potential of positive transfer is quite evident.

### 3.2 Questionnaire proposed by students

The basic issue of our research is to find out whether students of more foreign languages are aware of the language interference and/or potentials of the positive transfer. To become aware of the reality, the four students mentioned above created a questionnaire to be distributed to various groups of university students. The designers of the questionnaire were asked to refer to their already made self-reflections and to consider various factors which could be influencing in this sphere.

#### 3.2.1 Contents of the questionnaire

The students decided to include three types of questions in the questionnaire (open questions, multiple-choice questions, multiple-choice questions with a possibility to add an additional comment and/or answer not listed). Researching into opinions of people learning more foreign languages, the designers of the questionnaire decided to include the below given issues because they are felt as being important and influencing (there are 27 questions included in total):

- (a) the respondent's age and sex, the list of the languages ever studied
- (b) questions concerning the age issues and the length of the learning process (the age of starting with learning the first and other foreign languages, the choice of the order of the languages being studied, the feelings about the right age for starting the learning process)
- (c) relations to individual foreign languages and the causes of these relations (the favourite language, the most important language, reasons for starting with learning particular languages)
- (d) evaluation of the knowledge and skills of individual foreign languages and the causes of success / failure in their learning
- (e) evaluation of the teaching process (favourite / disliked ways of teaching; favourite / disliked methods of teaching; teaching / learning activities; the teachers' personalities and their approach to teaching and learners)
- (f) the issue of language interference (types and frequency of mistakes caused by the impact of other foreign languages)
- (g) the issue of positive transfer (giving examples of fruitful applying of the already acquired language skills)

#### 3.2.2 Findings

The process of the quantitative and qualitative analyses of the answers has not finished yet. However, the designers of the questionnaire are not feeling very happy about the so far obtained results. One kind of disappointment is linked with a rather ignorant approach of the respondents. Relatively a lot out of the total number of 250 respondents did not make proper self-reflections, especially when giving answers to the open questions. For example, the question "Which foreign language were you taught in the best way, and why do you consider that way to be the best?" was frequently not actually answered (there were answers like "I do not know.", "It is difficult to say.", "I actually do not remember."). The designers are also rather disappointed with their own product – they are now not very happy about the structure of the questionnaire and about formulating of some of the questions. They themselves admit that a kind of "ignorant" approach to answering some questions can result from incomplete understanding of the questions and/or from being confused by the questions. Some kinds of follow-up semi-structured interviews are felt as necessary and are being considered in the present phase of the research.

However, the above mentioned kinds of disappointment can be considered as positive in relation with the students' future research activities – the ability of self-assessment and of learning from this self-assessment and can result in improved ways of researching.

Preliminary findings show that learners of more foreign languages are not sufficiently trained in thinking about their learning process, they are not fully aware of potentials of the positive transfer and of potentials of using and applying the already built language competences. This is definitely a challenge for foreign language teachers because, as Crystal says on p. 432 in [6]: "Students can

*benefit from being taught to 'learn how to learn' foreign languages. ... They may also benefit from training in the kinds of basic skills involved in FLL."*

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

The Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove tries to encourage its students to start with their own research activities. These efforts are in accordance with Parrots' opinions expressed on p. 457 in [7]: Parrot encourages teachers to research the effectiveness of teaching, to realize activities which help them "to evaluate the effect their teaching has on their learners' awareness, understanding and speaking or writing".

The thorough analysis of the answers given in the opinion poll questionnaire is still being in process. But it is obvious that university students definitely tend to compare their previous achievements in learning foreign languages with their present learning experience. But it seems difficult for them to reveal causes of their success and failures.

The research process shows that students are not used to thinking about their own learning skills transferrable into other learning processes. During their research into experience with learning more foreign languages, the students are gradually revealing possible ways of profiting from a big potential of positive transfers. At the time being the research team is finishing the analysis of the results and is making proposals resulting from it. The involvement into the research is making the students' language awareness better; their awareness of learning and teaching languages is improving as well. It can be believed that this will have a highly positive impact also on their teaching practice and all their teaching career.

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**8<sup>th</sup> ICEEPSY 2017**  
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**LEARNING MORE FOREIGN LANGUAGES**

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*Abstract*

The purpose of the paper is to present the current and still preliminary results of the analysis of the opinions expressed by students learning more foreign languages. This analysis is based on findings made within the framework of one of the research projects which is being realized at the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic). In the present multi-cultural world, human beings are exposed to quite a big number of various languages, which can make the process of communication rather difficult. That is why one of the projects supported by the Faculty of Education of the above given university focuses on learners of more foreign languages. One of its research questions is: Are students of more foreign languages aware of the language interference and / or potentials of the positive transfer? Four students majoring in teaching foreign languages have been encouraged to participate in carrying out the research. Not only their research activities but also their feelings about the research are presented in the text. The research is being carried out at present. The so far available findings and results show that learners of more foreign languages are not sufficiently aware of potentials of the positive transfer. Since it is important to make learners and teachers of foreign languages aware of experts' opinions on language interference and positive language transfer, the paper includes references to these opinions.

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**Keywords:** Foreign language learning, interference, positive transfer



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## **1. Introduction**

The terms of globalization and multi-culturalism have become the key words characterizing the present world and life of people. The term “culture” included in the word “multi-culturalism” generally refers to everything which is acquired by the members of a particular community. Since the essential component of any culture is definitely its language, the above mentioned term of “multi-culturalism” goes hand in hand with the term of “multi-lingualism”.

Living and communicating in any kind of multi-cultural environment, human beings logically get a lot of multi-lingual inputs. Some expressions and phrases coming from foreign languages then appear in their communication realized in their mother tongue. These expressions of foreign languages have been quite often acquired by the speakers without any planned intentions, they are then used in non-systematic ways. But without being systematic, the process of communication cannot be successful. That is why the present educational policy of the multi-lingual European Union requires pupils and students of European schools to learn at least one foreign language as an obligatory school subject. Ten years ago, Stockwell said: “the ability to speak more than one language is more common in the world than monolingualism” (Stockwell, 2007, p. 11). Nowadays, people in their productive age are more or less required to speak at least one foreign language, foreign language skills have become a kind of demanded economic commodity. The issue of globalization is linked with efforts to make the process of learning and teaching foreign languages more successful.

### **1.1. Learning more foreign languages**

The process of learning more foreign languages is extremely demanding. As Crystal (2007, p. 430) says: “A few gifted language learners do exist, but most people arrive at their fluency only as a result of hard work, expended over a considerable period of time.”

However, language learning skills belong to those kinds of skills which are transferrable. Moreover, when learners are well trained and conveniently instructed by their teachers, they can become autonomous learners who are able to become aware of the phenomena which make their learning process easier. The well trained learners can also find the ways how to profit from the already acquired language skills and abilities, and how to eliminate the factors which have negative impacts on performances in foreign languages.

A sufficient level of linguistic competence can definitely make the learning process easier: “Learning more about language and about how language works is a useful, productive and interesting activity: increasing one’s awareness – being more ‘alive’ to language - can bring considerable benefit, both personal and professional.” (Arndt, Harvey & Nutall, 2000, p. 11).

The history of all the learning process is also quite important. As Harmer (1994, p. 4) says: “Another factor affecting the attitude of students is their previous experiences as language learners. If they were successful, then they may be pre-disposed to success now. Failure then may mean that they expect failure now.”

## **1.2. Project of specific research**

In 2016 a two-year project of so called specific research was started at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic). It focuses mainly on the impacts of the already acquired knowledge of foreign language/s on the process of learning another language / other languages later. The project is called "The impact of English on other foreign languages studied". The spheres in the centre of interest are language interference, potentially positive transfers and foreign language learners' awareness of and opinions on these two phenomena. The main objectives of the project are to find out how much influenced university students are by English (their first foreign language studied) in the process of studying other foreign languages and how they themselves perceive the process of their learning more foreign languages. These findings will be then used for making the process of teaching foreign languages improved. Through participating in this project, all the respondents are being trained in making self-reflections and in becoming self-aware of the learning process, which will make their life-long process of learning foreign languages more effective.

The Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove encourages its students to apply their research abilities as soon as possible. The students can become, together with their teachers, members of various research teams involved in specific projects. Then the students' research abilities and skills are developed, the researching students can learn how to practically apply their theoretical knowledge. The involvement of students into research projects is linked with one of the educational aims which should be essential for all universities and which is mentioned by Penny Ur, who calls for educating and supporting of "autonomous and creative professionals, with responsibility for their wider development of professional theory and practice" (Ur, 2009, p. 8).

Four students enrolled in Master Degree's studies majoring in teaching foreign languages are involved in the above mentioned specific research as members of the research team. Three of them are under-graduate students of German and English, one student majors in English, French and Czech (this selection is quite intentional – the perspective of both the mother tongue and two foreign languages will be applied). These students are currently in a kind of a "double position" - they are studying foreign languages and, simultaneously, they have already started their teaching career. This learner – teacher's "double position" will hopefully bring a broader perspective to the research realized.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Students learning more foreign languages make some kinds of mistakes which seem to result from the language interference. This issue has been discussed and researched into by a number of linguists and methodologists of foreign language teaching. Various kinds of contrastive analyses are carried out because, as Crystal (2007, p. 431) says: "The systematic comparisons of L1 and L2, in order to predict areas of greatest learning difficulty – a procedure known as contrastive analysis – explains only a small part of what goes on in foreign language learning."

It is a long process for the learners to build their knowledge of any language studied. Certain kinds of stages gradually appear in this learning process, which can be illustrated by the following statement made by Crystal (2007, p. 431): "Language learning, in this account, proceeds in a series of transitional

stages, as learners acquire more knowledge of the L2. At each stage, they are in control of a language system that is equivalent to neither the L1 nor the L2 – an interlanguage.”

The term of interlanguage refers to a kind of the linguistic system, which is different from both the learner’s mother tongue and the target language being studied, but which is evidently linked with both these languages. During the learning process, the interlanguage gradually stops developing and starts to disappear. Interlanguage is more evident with adult learners of foreign languages because five psycholinguistic processes hypothesized by Selinker can appear and can shape this linguistic system when adults learn another language: (a) native language transfer, (b) overgeneralization of target language rules, (c) transfer of training, (d) strategies of communication, and (e) strategies of learning.

It is obvious that errors are likely to appear in the target language when it is being learnt. Crystal sees producing of these errors positively because “Errors are likely to emerge when learners make the wrong deductions about the nature of the L2. ... These errors provide positive evidence about the nature of the learning process, as the learner gradually works out what the foreign language system is.” (Crystal, 2007, p. 432)

Talking about language systems, it can be interesting for learners to reveal which qualities are shared by different language systems. As it is said by Radford et al. (2009, p. 6): “Suppose grammars are produced for a variety of languages by specifying the components introduced above. Naturally, we would expect these grammars to exhibit certain differences, but we might also discover that they have some properties in common. If these properties appear in grammars for a wide range of languages, standard scientific practice leads us to hypothesize that they are common to the grammars of all natural languages.”

At this point we are coming to another important key word of this paper – the term of positive transfer. The word “transfer” is used by Selinker (see above) in connection with the native language and training. But the positive transfer is linked also with strategies of learning. If learners know which kinds of training and which learning strategies were convenient for them in the course of previous processes of language learning, they can apply them and they can make the new learning process more effective and more successful. This opinion can be supported by Crystal (2007, p. 432): “Students can benefit from being taught to ‘learn how to learn’ foreign languages ... They may also benefit from training in the kinds of basic skills involved in foreign language learning.” (Crystal, D., 2007, p. 432)

### **3. Research Questions**

The basic research question linked with this paper was: Are students of more foreign languages aware of the language interference and/or potentials of the positive transfer? To find answers to this basic research question and to make students self-reflecting, a questionnaire was created by the four above mentioned students involved in the research team.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of the paper is to present the current results of the analysis of the opinions expressed by students learning more foreign languages. The awareness of students’ opinions on the

language interference and language transfer could improve the teaching process. This statement can be supported by Tauchmanova (2016): “Foreign language teachers should be able to anticipate difficulties resulting from the negative impacts, they should be also able to use potentials of positive transfers. Then a more effective teaching – learning process can be expected.”

The results of the teaching process obviously depend also on the learners, their involvement in and commitment to the learning process. We can agree with the following opinion expressed by Crystal (2007, p. 431): “The active role of the learner is an established principle. It is recognized that there are important individual differences among learners, especially in personality and motivation, that can directly influence the teaching outcome. Research is therefore now directed not only at the way teachers teach, but also at the way learners learn.”

In connection with the issues discussed above it is clear that under-graduate students majoring in foreign language teaching need to be encouraged to start with their own research activities. Training in carrying out various kinds of research should not be neglected in curricula and syllabi of courses offered and held by institutions educating pre-service and also in-service teachers. We can agree with Parrot, who encourages teachers to research the effectiveness of teaching, to realize activities which help them “to evaluate the effect their teaching has on their learners’ awareness, understanding and speaking or writing” (Parrot, 2015, p. 457). That is why another purpose of this study is to present the activities of the four students, i.e. the four pre-service teachers involved in the research team.

## **5. Research Methods**

Two basic research methods are applied in our project – those of quantitative and qualitative research. The method of an opinion poll questionnaire is being applied as the main research method. That means that a bigger focus is on the qualitative analysis of the responses to the questions presented in a questionnaire distributed to learners of more foreign languages. Three types of questions were included in the questionnaire (open questions, multiple-choice questions, multiple-choice questions with a possibility to add an additional comment and/or answer not listed). The research findings and related comments on them are presented with references to already existing theoretical and practical findings.

## **6. Findings**

As it was mentioned above, the research and its analyses are still being carried out. Our presentation of the findings will be thus limited to two selected issues of the research. The first one is the issue of the questionnaire on the basis of which the quantitative and qualitative analyses are being carried out and which was created by the four under-graduate students who are involved in the research as members of the research team. The second issue presented are the findings about two study groups of elderly students attending courses in English which are run by so called University of the Third Age. The research into this specific age group of students and its analysis are more or less finished, therefore a preliminary summary of the findings can be presented.

### **6.1. Questionnaire created by under-graduate students majoring in teaching foreign languages**

As it was mentioned above, the task given to the students majoring in teaching English and another foreign language was to create a universal anonymous questionnaire focusing on the respondents' self-reflections on their experience with and awareness of the process of learning foreign languages. The questionnaire was supposed to be distributed to the following groups of students of the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove: (a) students majoring in teaching foreign languages, (b) students majoring in philology, (c) students majoring in other subjects than foreign languages, (d) students of the University of the Third Age who are enrolled in courses in English, (e) in-service teachers who are studying for improving their qualifications as English teachers.

The types of questions included in the questionnaire were already mentioned in connection with the research methods used. The main interest of this sub-chapter is to reveal which sub-groups of questions were designed by the researchers. The student – learner "double position" of the designers of the questionnaire has been already mentioned. Applying their theoretical knowledge and reflecting their own experience of being both a learner and a teacher, the authors of the questionnaire decided to use the following sub-groups of questions:

- (a) the respondent's age and sex, his / her list of the languages ever studied
- (b) questions concerning the age issues and the length of the learning process (the age of starting with learning the first and other foreign languages, the choice of the order of the languages being studied, the feelings about the right age for starting the learning process, etc.)
- (c) relations of the respondents to individual foreign languages and the causes of these relations (the favourite language, the most important language, reasons for starting with learning particular languages, etc.)
- (d) the respondents' evaluation of their own knowledge and skills of individual foreign languages and the causes of success / failure in learning them
- (e) the respondents' evaluation of the teaching process (favourite / disliked ways of teaching; favourite / disliked methods of teaching; teaching / learning activities; the teachers' personalities and their approach to teaching and to the learners)
- (f) language interference (types and frequency of mistakes caused by the impact of other foreign languages)
- (g) positive transfer (giving examples of fruitful applications of the already acquired language skills)

The quantitative and qualitative analyses of the answers have not been finished yet. However, the designers of the questionnaire are already rather disappointed. There are two main causes of this disappointment. The first one results from a rather ignorant approach of the respondents. Relatively a lot out of the total number of 250 respondents did not make proper self-reflections when answering the open questions. For example, the question "Which foreign language were you taught in the best way, and why do you consider that way to be the best?" was frequently not actually answered (there were answers like "I do not know.", "It is difficult to say.", "I actually do not remember."). The second kind of disappointment comes from the questionnaire itself. The designers are now not very happy about



structuring and formulating of some questions. They themselves admit that some “ignoring” answers can result from incomplete understanding of the questions. Some kinds of follow-up semi-structured interviews would be welcomed.

A positive factor about the researching students’ disappointment is that they are able of self-reflections and self-assessment, thanks to which they can improve their future research activities.

## **6.2. Elderly learners of more foreign languages**

Different kinds of courses are offered to seniors by so called Universities of the Third Age which have been established also in the Czech Republic. Courses in foreign languages run by the University of the Third Age which is guaranteed by the University of Hradec Kralove belong to the most popular and most demanded ones.

As it was mentioned above, the objective of the project is to find out how university students themselves perceive their own learning of more foreign languages. Since all the attendants of the foreign language courses run by the University of the Third Age have learnt at least three foreign languages in their life, they have also been made involved in the research. The questionnaire was distributed to forty senior respondents in total. Twenty out of these forty respondents were, in the academic year 2016/17, attending the courses in English offered to beginners, the other twenty students were attending the classes offered to upper-intermediate students of English. This research sample is not balanced from the gender point of view – only 2 respondents are males, 38 respondents are females. This misbalance, however, reflects the reality – most of the senior attendants of the courses in foreign languages are women. The respondents’ average age was 69.6 (the age range was from 63 to 79). It is important to mention that the first foreign language learnt by all the respondents was Russian, and as it has been already mentioned, all the respondents had learnt at least two foreign languages before started their foreign language studies at the University of the Third Age. Quite interesting is the fact that all of our respondents learnt German as their second language. Latin, English, French, Italian and Spanish appeared on the list as the third foreign language. French was given as the fourth foreign language in case of two respondents, one respondent learnt Spanish as the fourth foreign language.

It is obvious that such vast experience with learning foreign languages is linked with quite a high level of the linguistic competence of these senior students. We were really wondering whether these learners are aware of their pre-dispositions to use the potential of the positive transfer, and whether they are able to transfer their already acquired language skills and learning strategies into the process of learning other foreign languages. There were 8 negative reactions to the open question “In which sphere/s of learning English (i.e. the spheres of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, reading, writing, speaking) are your skills and experience gained during your earlier language studies helpful?” It seems important to mention that all the eight negative responses were given by the respondents from the group of beginners, and they were formulated in the following sense: “Certain knowledge of other languages makes my learning process more difficult.” “I am not able to profit from my previous studies. I think that they make me even more confused.” We were quite pleased, however, that our research can really result in a growing self-awareness of the respondents - one woman (again from the beginners’ group) answered the above given question in the following neutral way: “This question is quite interesting. I have never

thought about this issue. But I will start doing that.” The other 31 reactions were positive; in all the cases the sphere of vocabulary was chosen as that one in which the previously gained knowledge can be used. Here are two illustrative examples of these positive answers: “I think that I can learn some words more easily because of knowing German and French.” “I can guess the meaning of some words which sound similar in German.”).

Unfortunately, elderly learners are not sufficiently trained in making the most of their high linguistic competence but they are rather frustrated about language interference. A majority of the respondents chose the answer “often” or “very often” when answering the question “If you speak your second / third language, do you recall in your mind expressions or phrases existing in your first foreign language studied?”

Better reactions of the respondents were expected, for example, to the following open question asking for comparisons: “Which language were you, in your opinion, taught in the best way? Give the reasons for your answer.” Surprisingly, there was absolutely no answer in 8 cases, in 5 cases a language was / languages were mentioned without any reasoning. The comparisons were quite varied and interesting. These are some examples of the answers: “English – the basic grammar is easier; it is accessible at the Internet.” “English – at the time being, I am quite happy with my present teacher.” “English – grammar is practiced in a good way.” “German – a pro-active way of teaching, exchange stays.” “Russian – our teachers were good; their ways of teaching were interesting; I achieved excellent results in the secondary school leaving examination.” “English – after the political changes I got very interested in this language.” “English – I mean my previous private lessons of English with a lot of conversation.” “Italian – I live in Italy; I was exposed to the language.” “German – journeys to Germany, but the way of teaching was really tough.” “Russian – books, films, exchanging of letters; there were no other possibilities.” “German – I attended an intensive course.” “English – I have more time, it is learning for pleasure, I am happy when I can find that I have learnt something.” From these examples it is clear that not all of the answers actually referred to the way of teaching and some answers were rather inappropriate. At this point we can refer back to the issues mentioned in connection with the questionnaire.

When recalling positive aspects of previous studies of foreign languages, three respondents mentioned singing of German songs. Positive aspects of using music are mentioned also in literature – there is a close relation between music and language structures in lyrics of songs. Moreover, according to Badstübner-Kizik (2014), involvement of music supports development of a subjective creativity. Using of music in foreign language classes is recommended also by Besedova (2016): “Music can be widely used in foreign language teaching because music and language share certain features. The most important one is that both of them are distinctive means of communication which use listening materials and simultaneously try to analyse and reproduce them.”

Our research has revealed that elderly students tend to compare their previous achievements in studying foreign languages with their present experience and that they need to be trained in using of potentials of positive transfers.

## 7. Conclusion

It can be claimed that knowledge and skills acquired by studying the first foreign language are evidently transferred into the process of studying other foreign languages. Students learning more foreign languages should be trained to become more aware of the issues of the language interference and especially of the positive language transfer because this awareness can make their learning process more successful. This requirement of more intensive training in the sphere mentioned is in accordance with Crystal's opinion (Crystal, 2007, p. 430): "There is a great deal of educational failure and lack of achievement in the language-learning field, which requires explanation. ... It is therefore important to study the factors that govern success or failure in this field."

A similar conclusion concerning these positive and negative factors, this time applied to foreign language teachers' work, has been made by Ondrakova and her team who are doing research into the issue of errors made in the process of foreign language learning and teaching: "Teachers have to be able to present explanations to their pupils – the pupils have to be made aware of causes of errors and also of ways how to prevent making them." (Ondrakova, 2016)

The findings presented in this paper and the findings resulting from the analyses which are being carried out at present time will be used for making the teaching process improved. Although the research and the analysis of its results have not been finished yet, preliminary conclusions can be made. The so far available data and findings show that learners of more foreign languages are not fully aware of potentials of the positive transfer and of potentials of using and applying the already built language competences.

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## IMPACTS OF PREVIOUS STUDIES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES ON STUDYING ENGLISH LATER IN LIFE

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### ABSTRACT

Senior education, which has its specific features, is becoming one of the priorities in the present era of ageing of population, especially in Europe. Different kinds of courses are offered to seniors by so called Universities of the Third Age which have been established in the Czech Republic. Courses in foreign languages belong to the most popular and most demanded ones. Teaching at courses in foreign languages offered to seniors has to be adapted to the specific features of adult learners but it also cannot ignore the students' previous experience with and skills gained from learning their first foreign language or previous foreign languages. The author presents not only her personal experience in teaching English in courses of the University of the Third Age run by the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Králové (Czech Republic) but she also analyses the opinions and self-reflections expressed by seniors in a questionnaire which was distributed to and completed by them in connection with their learning more foreign languages. The aim of the text is to point out both the positive aspects and the negative transfers resulting from the learners' previous studies of other foreign languages, and to present proposals leading to potentially improved ways of teaching English in courses provided to seniors.

**Keywords:** Universities of the Third Age (USA), adult learners and seniors, learning and teaching of foreign languages, positive transfer, interference

### INTRODUCTION

The Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Králové (Czech Republic) has quite a long tradition of offering courses to the elderly generation. These courses started in the 1980s. Later, in 2000, the so called University of the Third Age (further referred to as USA) was established. This University is nowadays a member of the Association of the Universities of the Third Age.

Courses in foreign languages run by the USA of the University of Hradec Králové belong to the most popular and demanded ones. In the academic year 2016/17 the offer of foreign language courses for senior citizens was quite wide – applicants could choose and enrol into four courses in English (one for beginners, one for pre-intermediate students, and the other two courses for intermediate and upper-intermediate students), two courses in German, one course in French and one in Italian.

Teachers involved in giving courses in foreign languages offered to seniors are not specifically qualified for teaching the elderly generation. However, all of them have become aware of the specific features of these students, big efforts are made by the

teachers to meet the students' demands and make their learning process as successful as possible. That is why research surveys are carried out in which the course attendants made reflections on the courses offered to them.

The objective of one of the projects currently realized by the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Králové is to find out how university students themselves perceive their own learning of more foreign languages. Since all the attendants of the USA courses in foreign languages have learnt at least two foreign languages in their life, they are also involved in this research project. Through participating in this project, they are also being trained in making their self-reflections and in becoming self-aware of their learning process, especially of the issue of the positive transfer and language interference. The method of an opinion poll questionnaire is being applied as the main research method; three types of questions are included in the questionnaire (open questions, multiple-choice questions, multiple-choice questions with a possibility to add an additional comment and/or answer not listed). The findings will be used for making the teaching process improved – the already obtained results show that the students are not fully aware of the potential of using and applying the already built language competences.

## RESEARCH

The aim of this text is not to give a detailed survey, analysis and evaluation of the above mentioned project. The focus is given merely on the senior respondents, and the questions and answers linked with the topic of the paper. The research findings and related comments are presented with references to existing theoretical and practical findings. The research is still in process, and that is why the analysed and presented research sample is not big – the findings resulting from forty completed questionnaires are presented and commented on.

Twenty out of the forty respondents are attending courses in English offered by the USA to beginners, the other twenty students are attending classes offered to upper-intermediate students of English. The respondents answered the questions anonymously, they were, however, asked about their gender and age. The research sample is not balanced from the gender point of view – only 2 respondents are males, 38 respondents are females. This imbalance, however, reflects the reality – a vast majority of the attendants of the USA courses in foreign languages are women. The respondents' average age is 69.6 (the age range is from 63 to 79), it is important to mention that the first foreign language learnt by all the respondents was Russian. The earliest age at which the respondents started with Russian was seven, whereas the age of eleven was given as the latest. Russian was, for political reasons, the compulsory language to be learnt by all attendants of primary and secondary schools and also by university students in the former Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. The facts that Russian, as a Slavic language, is much closer to Czech than German and English and that Russian had to be learnt for political reasons can have an essential impact on answers to questions concerning the previous experience with studying foreign languages. All the respondents had learnt at least two foreign languages before their USA studies. Quite an interesting fact was revealed when analysing the answers concerning the order in which the foreign languages were studied – in all the cases the second foreign language learnt by our respondents was German, Latin, English, French, Italian and Spanish appeared

on the list as the third foreign language. French was given as the fourth foreign language in case of two respondents, one respondent learnt Spanish as the fourth foreign language.

Seniors are quite a specific target group of the educational process. Ondráčková [1] refers to Adamc and Dvořák, who characterize the USA students from their teachers' point of view: "The atmosphere during the courses, the students' excitement and their interest in studying are really exceptional and different in comparison with full-time students. Teachers involved in teaching at the USAs say that they do not know any more grateful and more attentive audience. What seniors really appreciate about their teachers are their efforts, patience, kind approach and also their sense of humour." This characterization can be confirmed by answers given to one of the items of the questionnaire: "How do you evaluate your foreign language teachers' quality?" Referring to the USA teachers, the respondents characterized them as "excellent, kind, patient, supportive, sensitive". There was not a single negative opinion concerning the teachers involved in the foreign language courses.

The author of this paper considers the following characterization of adults as learners which was made by Cross in 1981 and which is referred to in [2] as essential: "Physical and cognitive changes that take place as we age are important to note because they can have an effect on our learning: Older learners have slower reaction times than younger learners. We need more time to learn new things as we age, however, when adults can control the pace of learning, they can often effectively compensate for their lack of speed and learn new things successfully." However, according to the survey, only the negative aspects mentioned in the above given characterization are perceived by the respondents. There was no positive answer to the question "Can you feel any advantages of studying foreign languages later in your life?". The following additional comments appearing in connection with answering this question can illustrate the respondents' feelings: "I do not have any expectations from myself; learning is for me a kind of prevention against Alzheimer's disease." "Advantages? I am hardly able to remember anything at my age." Teachers should consider these opinions as a kind of challenge – it is clear that elderly learners should be positively motivated. Their teachers should point out the existence of a potentially effective compensation for drawbacks of the older age.

Elderly learners of foreign languages should also make the most of another positive factor of the advanced age, of so called cognitive maturity. As we can read in [3]: "Cognitive maturity is the influence of genetic effects, from all prior experience and all earlier learning, which are reflected in structuring and the growth of human cognitive abilities. The human cognitive capacity for processing and storing information changes under the influence of age and experience. Older people have several advantages compared to younger people. They have a better aptitude for the deductive learning of grammatical structures, they differentiate words better due to a greater accuracy and specificity of meanings and their association is better developed. Their speech perception and production works with greater cognitive control, their interference control is also more secure, metalinguistic awareness more developed and their knowledge of the world is better, which results in a more accurate interpretation of statements. They are able to recognize and correct their own and other students' mistakes more easily, analyse and generalise better and make better use of the knowledge of their native language for learning a foreign language. Their memory

capacity is increased and conversational strategies more developed. They approach strategies of learning and remembering conscientiously and economically."

Talking about the above mentioned cognitive maturity, it is important to mention another essential fact – all the elderly learners who attend foreign language courses run by the USA have already gained linguistic competences in both their mother tongue (Czech) and at least two foreign languages (Russian and German). That is why they welcome (or at least do not mind) theoretical clarifications of grammar rules, and they try to build certain systematic knowledge of the system of the foreign language learnt. Seniors are "goal oriented", they appreciate clear presentations and explanations of the real application and use of particular rules existing in the given language. Seniors generally agree with the following opinion expressed by Underwood [4]: "There is no doubt that some kind of implicit knowledge of grammar is necessary for the mastery of language at anything beyond a very basic level; you cannot use words effectively unless you know how much they should be put together in acceptable sentence or phrase structures."

The term "grammar" is quite general and can be understood in many ways. In this text, Radford's understanding of grammar [5] is considered and accepted: "a grammar of a language comprises (at least) four components: a lexicon, a syntactic component, a phonological component and a logical component." As it was mentioned above, students of English at our USA have become familiar with at least three grammars, resp. grammars of at least three languages (i. e. grammars of Czech, Russian and German). This great linguistic competence can be quite useful when other languages are studied because it can be positively transferred. This opinion can be supported by Radford et al. [6]: "Suppose grammars are produced for a variety of languages by specifying the components introduced above. Naturally, we would expect these grammars to exhibit certain differences, but we might also discover that they have some properties in common. If these properties appear in grammars for a wide range of languages, standard scientific practice leads us to hypothesize that they are common to the grammars of all natural languages, and this means that an additional goal for the linguist is the development of a theory of Universal Grammar." The author of this paper can confirm from her own experience that it is really fruitful to use the already existing linguistic competence of participants in USA courses and their experience with learning their first foreign language, or potentially other foreign languages. Being familiar with the fact that the students' first foreign language was Russian, she reminded the Russian structure "да рожа томы хазааа" when presenting the structurally similar English version "two years ago". The students appreciated this clarification and were quite happy about two facts: They revealed that they were still able to recall something kept in their memory, and they found it much easier to learn and remember something structurally similar to their already gained knowledge.

As mentioned above, the teachers of foreign languages at the USA of the University of Hradec Králové make big efforts to be as supportive as possible for their students. This support comes dominantly from the teachers' theoretical knowledge of pedagogy and psychology of various age groups, and methodology of foreign language teaching. Teachers and educators of elderly students have to keep in mind that seniors are more critical when perceiving the teachers' presentations, they tend to compare every new teaching and learning process with those already experienced. As Tauchmanová says [7]: "Sometimes it can be really difficult to convince elderly students that it is really

not absolutely necessary to translate every single sentence from the text presented at the beginning of the unit in the textbook (although that was a kind of routine typical of courses in foreign languages forty or fifty years ago)." The comparisons of the current way of teaching with the students' previous learning experience can make the teaching process more difficult for teachers. On the other hand, however, the already existing linguistic competences and language skills must not be ignored. On the contrary, teachers and students themselves should think about them, reveal their potential positives and then make the most of them.

To find out whether learners of foreign languages try to use their experience with learning previous foreign languages, and whether they compare the teaching processes, there was an item in the questionnaire utterly asking for such a comparison: "Which language were you, in your opinion, taught in the best way? Give the reasons for your answer." Surprisingly, there was absolutely no answer in 8 cases, in 5 cases a language was / languages were mentioned without any reasoning. The comparisons were quite varied and interesting. These are some examples of the answers: "English – the basic grammar is easier; it is accessible at the Internet." "English – at the time being, I am quite happy with my present teacher." "English – grammar is practiced in a good way." "German – a pro-active way of teaching, exchange stays." "Russian – our teachers were good; their ways of teaching were interesting; I achieved excellent results in the secondary school leaving examination." "English – after the political changes I got very interested in this language." "English – I mean my previous private lessons of English with a lot of conversation." "Italian – I live in Italy; I was exposed to the language." "German – journeys to Germany, but the way of teaching was really tough." "Russian – books, films, exchanging of letters; there were no other possibilities." "German – I attended an intensive course." "English – I have more time, it is learning for pleasure, I am happy when I can find that I have learnt something." From these examples it is clear that not all of the answers actually referred to the way of teaching and some answers were rather inappropriate. It seems quite important and interesting to mention the fact that half of the respondents who attend the USA courses for beginners in English (which means that they started with English at a really older age) were positive about the ways in which they were taught their first foreign language (Russian), three quarters of the upper-intermediate students of English were the most positive about their being taught English.

There was another pair of questions asking for self-reflecting comparisons: "Which foreign language/s do you speak, in your opinion, best of all in every-day situations? Can you find any causes of that?" There were 9 cases of giving no answer at all to this question and 5 cases of the absolute "self-underevaluation" (the answer was: "None"). Our respondents seem to be too self-critical when assessing the level of their own abilities and skills or they seem to be worried to make any self-evaluation. This is rather worrying because the lack of self-confidence is definitely an essential obstacle (not only) in the process of language learning. It seems that with increasing age, the level of self-confidence is declining. Unfortunately, even in cases in which the respondents decided for one foreign language which they are the best at, there were very few cases of proper revealing and defining the causes of being more successful in using this particular language. ("German – I have used it most frequently." "German – I have learnt it for the longest time." "Russian – I have learnt it for the longest time and nowadays I regularly use it during my summer stays in Turkey." "German – I started

learning it at my younger age." "Russian – it is a Slavic language quite close to Czech." "Russian – it is easier to learn. I love Russian literature, my Russian textbooks were better." "English – I have studied it most intensively and for the longest time." "English – I travel a lot and use English in every-day situations abroad. Moreover, I used English in my profession." "English – I often use computers.")

Speaking about learning foreign languages at an older age, the issue of so called interference must not be ignored. There are numerous definitions of this term; one of the shortest was given by Ellis [8]: "Interference is the influence that the learner's L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2." It can be logically assumed that in case of learning more languages, a bigger number of wrong and inapplicable transfers of the already acquired language habits into the production of other languages will be made by learners. We do not want to claim, however, that the number of interference mistakes rises proportionally with the rising number of the foreign languages learnt. As Swan and Smith [9] say: "Since transfer mistakes arise where the systems of two languages are similar but not identical, they are most common (at least as far as grammar and vocabulary are concerned) in the interlanguage of students who speak languages closely related to the target language." The awareness of the issue of language interference is important for elderly learners of foreign languages. Our respondents were asked to give examples of the mistakes which had been made by them probably due to the negative transfer from other languages. The answers confirmed Swan and Smith's opinion presented above – the mistakes mentioned by the respondents appeared in grammar and vocabulary and they were transferred much more from German, which is much closer to English than Russian: "I make permanent mistakes in the word order of longer sentences." "Sometimes I use German words." "Present perfect tense is a nightmare for me." There was only one answer mentioning the negative transfer of German spelling into English spelling ("Sometimes I feel rather awkward because of spelling of English words in the German way, e.g. 'Englisch', 'schönes', etc.")

As it has been already mentioned, the linguistic competence of seniors attending the English courses at our U3A is quite high. The question is whether these learners are able to transfer their already acquired language skills into the process of learning other languages sharing some equivalent features. In the questionnaire there was one open question concerning this issue: "In which sphere/s of learning English (i.e. the spheres of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, reading, writing, speaking) are your skills and experience gained during your earlier language studies helpful?" There were 8 negative reactions (e.g. "Certain knowledge of other languages makes my learning process more difficult." "I am not able to profit from my previous studies. I think that they make me even more confused."); all these negative reactions were given by the beginners in English. One lady (again from the beginners' group) gave a kind of neutral answer: "This question is quite interesting. I have never thought about this issue." The other 31 reactions were positive; in all the cases the sphere of vocabulary was chosen (just two examples of these positive answers: "I think that I can learn some words more easily because of knowing German and French." "I can guess the meaning of some words which sound similar in German.").

At this point the following general comment can be made: Elderly learners of English are able and willing to identify their weaknesses but they are too little self-confident to

think about and be proud of their strong points and make the most of these strong points.

## CONCLUSION

The already acquired knowledge of one language has definitely an impact on learning and understanding of another language. As mentioned above, seniors attending the courses in English run by the University of Hradec Králové have previous experience with learning at least two foreign languages before starting their U3A studies. They generally find this experience positive and fruitful but they feel rather frustrated about being slower at learning and less capable of learning and memorizing new things. When being asked about their past and present studies, they are generally aware of the existence of the issues of the language interference and positive transfers and but they are not sufficiently trained in making the most of their linguistic competence.

The thorough analysis of the answers given in the opinion poll questionnaire is still being carried out. But it is obvious that the respondents sometimes seemed confused by the questions asked and they did not give any answers to some questions or they gave rather incomplete or inappropriate answers in some cases. That is why we have decided to carry out a kind of follow-up semi-structured interviews with the respondents in which the problematic questions and issues will be clarified. We hope that these clarifications will make the respondents aware of the benefits brought by properly done self-reflections. The students of the U3A definitely tend to compare their previous achievements in studying foreign languages with their present experience. But it is obviously difficult for them to reveal causes of their success and failures.

Elderly students of foreign languages definitely deserve our respect and support. Our research has revealed that teachers at the U3As face quite a challenging task – they have to convince their elderly students about the existence of a potentially effective compensation for drawbacks of the older age. The aim of the teachers should be to train their students in using their previous experience with learning foreign languages and in using of potentials of positive transfers.

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